

Opinion: Orange County, the new Gotham

By Joe Mathews

Why does a place as big and beautiful as Orange County behave in ways so small and ugly?

In recent weeks, county supervisors first voted to oppose state sanctuary laws, thus aligning themselves with President Trump, who has targeted California in a campaign of lies and mass deportation, and against the county's own immigrant families.



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Then the county abandoned a plan to house hundreds of homeless people in temporary shelters in Huntington Beach, Laguna Niguel, and Irvine, after protests from people in those cities.

Protecting its own immigrants and providing housing for its own people shouldn't be a heavy lift for a wealthy county with 3.2 million people—more than the populations of 21 states. Orange County, the sixth most populous in the United States, is one of the richest jurisdictions on earth, with a bigger economy than Greece or Portugal.

But the recent decisions on immigrants and the homeless weren't surprising. Orange County has an especially bad case

of a California malady: Our local governments simply can't meet the challenges and standards of our diverse and globally oriented communities.

"We think of ourselves as Mayberry," says Fred Smoller, a Chapman University political scientist who studies Orange County, "when we really are closer to Gotham City."

The decisions on immigrants and the homeless reflect Orange County's fundamental confusion about itself. County officials often portray themselves as weak, playing the victim. On immigration, they somehow saw themselves as targets of a state bullying them (albeit to protect their own immigrants). In the homeless case, the official pretense is that Orange County and its cities can't afford to house a few thousand homeless people.

Logic is often twisted. In opposing the immigrant sanctuary laws, the county supervisors portrayed themselves as honoring federal supremacy—even if it means collaborating with mass deportations that increasingly target non-criminals. But when supervisors dropped the homeless plan, they posed as defenders of local sovereignty, as a federal judge demands action on the homeless.

There are dangers to this Mayberry complex. By clinging to its self-image as a collection of NIMBY-ish small towns, Orange County has made itself profoundly vulnerable to mismanagement and corruption.

Two decades ago, local officials couldn't stop treasurer Robert Citron until his bad investments bankrupted the county. More recently, the county has failed to confront public official corruption in its law enforcement structure, even after its previous sheriff went to prison.

A long-running scandal has shown that both the district attorney's office and the sheriff's department "secretly operated unconstitutional scams with jail snitches to win

convictions, hid exculpatory evidence from defendants and juries, and, when necessary, committed perjury in hopes of masking the cheating," as the *OC Weekly* put it. Judges have condemned the misconduct, which so far has led to the dismissal of 18 cases for murder, attempted murder, and felony assault.

But the district attorney and sheriff haven't lost their jobs. Instead, these same county law enforcement agencies now claim to be defending California from criminals by siding with the Trump administration's mass deportation strategies. It's right to be cynical about this. Is Orange County using the immigration issue to distract from law enforcement's own troubles? Or, even worse, are the sheriff and the district attorney trying to curry favor with federal authorities and thus blunt federal investigation into their own misconduct?

The county's Mayberry complex doesn't just hurt people caught up in the criminal justice system, or the homeless or immigrants. It has given Orange County a government that's out-of-step with the desires of the people who live there. In a new **Chapman University survey** of 706 Orange County residents, 83 percent of respondents said they wanted to find a way for undocumented immigrants to stay, and 64 percent said immigrants "contribute more than they take" from the economy. The same poll found that assisting the poor and homeless was the second biggest issue in the county among residents (with 24 percent citing it).

California Democrats have fantasies of turning the historically Republican Orange County into a blue place that will support a statewide progressive agenda. That won't happen, and it shouldn't. The poll shows that Orange County's residents are very much in the middle, disgusted with Washington, D.C., and with both parties, and worried about their kids and the cost of housing and living here.

Ideally, Orange County could pursue a moderate path that is

true to its people's real views, which embody a practical California libertarianism: skeptical of costly regulation while championing entrepreneurialism, immigrants, open government, limits on law enforcement, and preservation of its natural treasures.

But that would take a county with new leadership that thinks in ways as big and beautiful as Orange County itself.

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